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Message Text

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---------- 128572
R 202110 Z APR 73
FM SECSTATE WASHDC
TO AMEMBASSY ROME
AMEMBASSY SAIGON

C O N F I D E N T I A L STATE 074929

E. O. 11652: GDS
TAGS PINS, IT, VS
SUBJECT: " POLITICAL PRISONERS"
REF: (A) ROME 2973 (B) SAIGON 6761

1. IN RESPONDING TO GASPARI REQUEST, YOU MAY WISH TO DRAW ON FOLLOWING GENERAL POINTS TO SUPPLEMENT REFTEL B: THE VEIY TERM " POLITICAL PRISONERS" IS HIGHLY MISLEADING. IT IS OFTEN USED LOOSELY TO COVER, AMONG OTHERS, HARDENED POLITICAL CADRE, SABOTEURS AND TERRORISTS. MANY OF THESE PEOPLE WERE ENGAGED IN ATTEMPTS TO OVERTHROW THE GVN BY FORCE AND THUS ARE NOT " POLITICAL PRISONERS" IN A MEANINGFUL SENSE OF THE TERM. THESE " COMMUNIST OFFENDERS" AND COMMON CRIMINALS FORM THE VAST BULK OF THE PRISON POPULATION.

2. THE COMMUNISTS AND OTHERS CONTRIBUTING TO THE CURRENT ORGANIZED PROPAGANDA CAMPAIGN ON THIS SUBJECT ARE FOND OF USING THE PHRASE "200,000 POLITICAL PRISONERS"; IN THE PAST, THEY HAVE VARIOUSLY RESORTED TO 100,000 OR 300,000. ALL ARE EQUALLY REMOTE FROM REALITY; THE TOTAL CAPACITY
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OF THE SOUTH VIETNAMESE PRISON SYSTEM IS, IN OUR BEST JUDGMENT, 40-45,000. YOU MAY WISH TO CITE 12/1/72 NY TIMES ARTICLE BY CRAIG WHITNEY (SEE WIRELESS FILE) WHICH POINTS OUT THAT INDEPENDENT AUTHORITIES CONFIRMED GVN POLICE STATEMENT THAT TOTAL NUMBER OF PERSONS DETAINED IN

SOUTH VIETNAMESE JAILS AT THAT TIME WAS ABOUT 35,000. PRESIDENT THIEU, DURING RECENT VISIT HERE, PUT PRISON TOTAL AT 38,000.

3. FRIVOLOUS USE OF FIGURE LIKE 200,000 SYMPTOMATIC OF WHOLE LEVEC OF CRITICISM ON SUBJECT, INCLUDING SYSTEM-ATIC AND SENSATIONALIZED PROPAGANDA ON MISTREATMENT. WE CONSIDER THESE UNSUBSTANTIATED CHARGES TO BE EITHER FALSE OR GROSSLY EXAGGERATED.

4. ARTICLE 8(C) OF JANUARY 27 AGREEMENT ON VIET- NAM SPECIFICALLY PROVIDES THAT THE QUESTION OF CAPTURED AND DETAINED SOUTH VIETNAMESE CIVILIAN PERSONNEL IS MATTER FOR TWO SOUTH VIETNAMESE PARTIES CONCERNED TO RESOLVE BETWEEN THEMSELVES. BOTH PARTIES HAVE RESPONSIBILITIES ON CIVILIAN DETAINEE QUESTION, NOT JUST GVN. FOR EXAMPLE, PRG CLAIMS THAT IT HOLDS ONLY 400 CIVILIANS FOR RETURN TO THE GVN UNDER ARTICLE 8(C). AFTER YEARS OF WAR AND THOUSANDS OF ABDUCTIONS YEARLY, PRG HAS MUCH MORE TO ACCOUNT FOR; 400 FIGURE IS PALPABLY ABSURD.

5. IN BRIEFING GASPARI, INFORMATION FURNISHED REF B MAY BE USED, TO EXCCUDE COMMENTS REGARDING RECLASSIFICATION OF COMMUNIST OFFENDERS AS COMMON CRIMINALS. CARE SHOULD ALSO BE USED IN QUOTING FIGURES (SEE FOLLOWING PARA-GRAPH), AND YOU SHOULD STRESS THAT OUR ESTIMATES ARE NOT PRECISE. REASON FOR THIS STEMS FROM THE REALITY OF A FLUID, CHANGING SITUATION PRESENTLY SUBJECT TO NEGOTIATION BETWEEN THE GVN AND PRG IN BOTH FRANCE AND SAIGON AS PARAGRAPH 4 REF B INDICATES. LACK OF PRECISION ALSO A FUNCTION OF OUR DIMINISHING PRESENCE IN VIET- NAM, ESPECIALLY THE END OF OUR ADVISORY ROLE TO THE SOUTH VIETNAMESE POLICE FORCE AND PRISON SYSTEM, AS CALLED FOR UNDER ARTICLE 5 OF THE AGREEMENT.

6. FOR SAIGON: WE NOTE SERIES OF CONFLICTING GVN
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ESTIMATES OF PRISON POPULATION. PRESIDENT THIEU WHILE

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IN US ESTIMATED TOTAL POPULATION AT SLIGHTLY OVER
38,000 AND PUT FIGURE OF THOSE AWAITING TRIAL AT ABOUT
12,000. A FOREIGN MINISTRY SPOKESMAN SAID SUBSEQUENTLY
(FBIS TRANSMISSION OF VIET- NAM PRESS ARTICLE OF
APRIL 17) THAT THE RESPECTIVE FIGURES ARE 30,176 AND
" NEARLY 5,000" AWAITING TRIAL. REQUEST EMBASSY CLARIFI-
CATION, IF POSSIBLE. WOULD ALSO APPRECIATE FURTHER
DETAILS ON 14 BUDDHIST STUDENT LEADERS RELEASED, AND
AN QUANG REACTION IF ANY. ANY FURTHER INFORMATION EMBASSY
CAN DEVELOP ON GVN INTENTIONS REGARDING RELEASE OF
" POLITICAL PRISONERS" WOULD BE VERY HELPFUL. PORTER

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